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TELEGRAM

August 19, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 3817 - UNKNOWN)
TAGS: PREL, PGOV
Captions: None
Subject: AS ZAYED CENTER FLAP GROWS, UAEG WANTS USG TO INTERVENE
WITH HARVARD
Ref: None

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 03817

SIPDIS
CXABU:
ACTION: POL
INFO: ECON RSO AMB DCM P/M

DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:RAALBRIGHT
DRAFTED: POL:JFMAYBURY
CLEARED: PAO:TPONCE

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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 003817

SIPDIS

NSC FOR AMB ELIOT ABRAMS

NEA/FO AND NEA/ARP, CAIRO FOR HEGADORN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/13
TAGS: PREL PGOV TC
SUBJECT: AS ZAYED CENTER FLAP GROWS, UAEG WANTS USG TO
INTERVENE WITH HARVARD

Refs: A. Abu Dhabi 3801 B. 02 Abu Dhabi 4712

11. (U) Classified by Charge d'Affaires, a.i.,
Richard Albright, for Reasons 1.5 (B) and (D).

12. (C) Summary: In very frank terms during a meeting with
the Charge and Polchief on August 19, UAE Information
Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said President Sheikh
Zayed "went the extra mile" when he decided to close down
the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up (ZCCF)
because of its negative activities. If the matter "turns
sour," Sh. Abdullah warned, referring to Harvard
University's possible decision to return Sh. Zayed's \$2.5
million endowment to establish an Islamic Studies Chair at

the Divinity School, the first to be hurt will be America's friends in the UAE. Meanwhile, the Arab League, Arab journalists, and the to be ousted director of the ZCCF are rallying to the defense of the Center. Two UAEG emissaries are on their way to the U.S. to meet with Harvard officials, hoping to persuade the university not to return the endowment. End summary.

UAEG: Frank talk on a sensitive subject

¶13. (C) UAE Information Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan met with Charge and Polchief August 18 and urged the Administration to intercede with Harvard to be sure that University officials understand the steps the UAE has taken to deal with the Zayed Center and urge Harvard not to return Sheikh Zayed's \$2.3 million endowment. Charge noted our appreciation for the steps being taken to halt the Center's negative activities and as he did with de facto Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamdan Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan (Hbz) two days earlier, the Charge said that the continued presence of the ZCCF Web site (www.zccf.org.ae) with its negative content diminishes the impact of the UAEG's actions on the Zayed Center. Sh. Abdullah was surprised to learn that the Web site was still active.

¶14. (C) Sh. Abdullah warned that if Harvard returns Sh. Zayed's endowment, the first to be hurt "are your friends in the UAE," and "whoever has been supporting in whatever way the Zayed Center will end up being victorious." Everyone who has been "nasty" with the U.S. and with the UAE because of its desire to have stronger relations with the U.S. "will be laughing in our faces and saying, 'You deserve what you get.'" Nevertheless, Abdullah pledged that the UAEG would not change its policy toward the U.S. Charge agreed that a Harvard decision to return the endowment would be a very damaging development. He assured Sh. Abdullah that his concerns would be communicated to Washington.

UAEG Emissaries to Harvard

¶15. (C) The UAEG is sending Dr. Jamal Al-Suweidi, the director of the UAEG think tank Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), and Ahmed Mohammed Al-Humairi, an undersecretary for consultative and technical affairs at the Office of the President, to meet with Harvard officials (see reftel A). Although he did not know details of their appointments, Sh. Abdullah said one of their meetings may be with Harvard theology student Rachel Fish who first raised the ZCCF issue with Harvard administrators.

¶16. (U) Meanwhile, the ZCCF issue has been receiving front-page coverage in the local and Arab world press in the last two days. London-based Arabic daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported August 18 that the UAE will close the ZCCF after the Center was accused of promoting conspiracy theories.

Center Ties to the Arab League

¶17. (U) In a statement to the Associated Press, Arab League spokesman Hesham Youssef in Cairo said it would be a great loss if the Center's activities were reduced in any way. He termed accusations of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism "absolutely baseless." As reported in reftel B, the ZCCF was founded in 1999 as the result of a 1997 Arab League Symposium held in the UAE. The symposium recommended that there should be a research center created to coordinate activities within the Arab League and promote Arab causes abroad. The project was endorsed by the Arab League Council, which comprises the foreign ministers of member states, to become an affiliate of the League. The ZCCF was

set up under a decree by UAE President Sheikh Zayed. Although officially associated with the Arab League, the ZCCF is funded almost entirely by the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The Center has its own printing press, which churns out studies and lectures, and it features a Web site that carries summaries of recent presentations. (As of COB August 19, the site was still up, and contained the same information that was supposed to have been eliminated, including a past guest speaker's lecture in which he questioned the Holocaust, which had caused the controversy.)

ZCCF Director Defends Center's Purpose

¶18. (U) In Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Khalifa Al-Murar, the to be ousted Director General of the Center, strongly rebuffed claims that the ZCCF promotes anti-Semitic views. The English-language daily "Gulf News," published an article Aug. 19 under the headline "Zayed Center hits back at Zionist campaign." In it, Al-Murar asserted that the Center is exercising its right for freedom of expression, and it is a neutral institution that offers a platform for all scholars to air their ideas. "Gulf News" also reported that the Center has received solidarity signatures from hundreds of Arab journalists who want to keep the Center open and who denounce what described as a "systematic smear campaign by Zionist circles in the United States and Britain against the Zayed Center because of its distinct cultural and civilized role." The "Gulf News" article did not mention the anti-Semitic and anti-US content of the Web site.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: Sheikh Abdullah's decision to go public in the August 18 Sharq al-Awsat with the ZCCF closure story is a significant departure from the normal practice of the close lipped Beni Fatima. It appears that they have calculated that their private letters and messages had not proved effective and that they were going to have to enter the media fray to combat accusations against the UAEG that have been circulating for months. Now that the debate has gone public, to be fired Zayed Center director al-Murar has been in the media defending himself and his Center; the Arab League is calling for the Center to remain open and; a collection of Arab nationalist "intellectuals" is crying that this is all a Zionist conspiracy. It will probably take the UAEG some time to work through this, formally close the Center, shut down the website and deal with the Arab League. This debate, which erupted in the UAE media today, reflects a growing degree of press freedom that the UAE has tried to promote. Sheikh Abdullah cited these concerns in explaining their hesitancy to close ZCCF's website. For now, the government has gone public and is taking the flak from the Arab world. This step may help them with Harvard. We recommend that Department officials meet with ECSSR director Jamal as-Suweidi to discuss these developments and next steps.

ALBRIGHT